Encountering Media On the Battlefield:

Will You Be Prepared?

by Captain Jeffrey P. Nors

The relationship between our country's armed forces and the media is unique. Like any constantly evolving relationship, it has its highs and lows. Gone — for now — are the days of a uniformed press corps attached to moving armies. The birth and rise of the 24-hour news cycle and international live broadcast has changed how the people of this nation will see every engagement in the future.

A strong military is a pillar of our democracy, as is the media. The media inform the very people who pay our salaries, own our equipment, and help form the opinions of the parents whose sons and daughters they entrust to us. For a significant portion of this nation, the media is their only link to the military. By recognizing and using this tool, we can tell the Army story, promote a positive image and continue to give our nation reasons to be proud of us.

A simple analogy is this: your unit is on a patrol when you make contact. The first thing you do is assess what you are up against. The second thing is to report your situation to higher headquarters. In a broader sense, we do the same thing. As soon as we find out what our situation is, we must report it to our higher headquarters. In this case, the American people are our higher headquarters, and the media is our radio.

By keeping in mind a few key points about the media, we, as leaders, can prepare our soldiers for when we encounter reporters on the battlefield. It is important we incorporate this, just as we incorporate the concept of civilians on the battlefield as part of our training.

Most reporters today have never served a day in uniform. Only a small percentage cover the military regularly. By gauging reporters' depth of knowledge about Army operations, we can help them to understand what we do. Patience comes in quite handy when explaining things that may be mundane to us; i.e., platoons are made of squads, which are made of fire teams, etc. But don't mistake their lack of knowledge for stupidity, as most reporters possess above-average intelligence. Respect for that aspect and patience will get you a long way.

Contrary to Hollywood stereotypes, it is not the pushy journalist who causes less-than-favorable stories. Think about it for a second; who are you more likely to say something embarrassing to, a reporter who is aggressive and needling at a certain point, or one who is conversational and non-threatening? The aggressive reporter will put you on your guard, and you will more likely say nothing, much less anything compromising.

Luckily, the majority of reporters want to file a 'good news' story. They have to put food on the table too, and wouldn't want to burn bridges for future stories. Because of this relationship, we can help them find the "good news" story.

"Interview 101"

The first rule when encountering media on the battlefield is that **your mission comes first.** In other words, you are in control. You are not required to grant an interview. You control when and how long the interview lasts. A great example of this principle comes from my experience as an observer-controller during the Mission Readiness Exercise (MRE) for the Stabilization Force Rotation in June 2001 at Fort Polk, La. As part of the exercise, a crowd of civilians was protesting American presence. When SFOR was called in to "control" the riot, there also was a group of reporters present covering the developing story. While attempting to talk to the SFOR commander on the scene, the commander politely but firmly reminded the reporters that he had a mission to accomplish. He told them once the situation was under control, he would be more than happy to grant a brief interview outside the town. With that said, he went about his mission. After the demonstration was under control, he met with several of the role-playing reporters outside the town and gave a terrific interview.

When entering a theater of operations, journalists register at a central office to receive their credentials. Their identity, news group affiliation and other information is confirmed to ensure that they are, indeed, members of an accredited media outlet. They are then issued some sort of identification badge or card which must be on them at all times. Even if they are escorted by public affairs, go ahead and check their credentials before granting an interview so you can report this information to your higher headquarters. Usually, reporters will be reluctant to hand over their credentials, so it's preferred to write down the information. It would be helpful to familiarize yourself with what current media credentials look like when you arrive in the theater of operations.

This leads to the next critical point of dealing with media on the battlefield. Most of the time, a public affairs representative will escort reporters. If you decide to grant an interview, use this resource to help you prepare. They will brief you beforehand as to what the reporters will probably ask, review command messages, (discussed later in this article), remind you about opera-

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tional security (OPSEC), and other pertinent matters. Use the time before an interview to go over probable questions and come up with accurate, reasonable answers. Be prepared to talk about your current mission and your part in the overall operation. This is also your chance to make sure your uniform is squared away — remember, you represent the Army.

A public affairs representative may not always be available. In that event, don't forget to check the reporter's credentials and to contact your higher headquarters. Be aware that your mission still comes first. If they are interfering, be polite but firm in reminding them you have a mission to accomplish. This, too, is part of the agreement they sign when reporters receive the credentials. Neither you nor your soldiers can detain reporters, their tapes, notepads, or their equipment. Never try to grab or confiscate their cameras. If there is a security risk, such as reporters at a gate, you can search them and their equipment prior to allowing them to pass. Again, be polite but firm, and explain as you go along that you are searching as a security precaution. This is important because that soldier at the gate is often the reporter's first impression, and sets the tone for the rest of the interview.

Reporters will, at a minimum, want to talk to whomever is in charge. If time and mission permits, they may also want to talk to other soldiers in your unit. It is always a good idea to know which soldiers have no problems talking about their specific job, and more importantly, who will portray a positive outlook.

Prior to starting the interview, set the ground rules up front. Let the media representative know how much time you have for the interview. Five to ten minutes is preferred, and is usually adequate. Remind them that you will not discuss future operations or specifics of your current operation. Never agree to an interview "off the record." Always assume that there is a live microphone, and everything is being recorded. Usually, you can give your name, rank, unit and position. However, the current guidance during this time of crisis is to only give your first name for the purpose of force protection. This came about, in part, from incidents during the Kosovo air war, when many families of the Air Force pilots interviewed by media received threats.

While conducting the interview, there are several things to keep in mind. First and foremost is OPSEC. Avoid giving specifics of your unit. A now-famous example of this is the Navy SEAL team washing up on the shore of Somalia under the floodlights of reporters. The reporters had pieced together the information about the team's landing location from other interviews they conducted.

Also, use broad, generalistic terms in your responses. For example, instead of saying, "I have 36 soldiers in my platoon, " say instead, "I have a standard-sized light infantry platoon." If you are pressured for more information, continue to use broad terms. "Around thirty," is acceptable. During the train-up and execution of our most recent Warfighter Exercise (WFX), we went a step further by using the same broad, general terms during our daily press briefings. We described our losses as "light," "medium," or "heavy," and avoided using specific numbers. We described the size of the division as, "a standard-sized light infantry division, with all of the equipment available at that level." With that information being just a few clicks away for a reporter on the internet, it is an acceptable answer. Never discuss specific dates, future operations or rules of engagement.

The other side of the OPSEC issue is trying to hide behind the line, "that's classified." What you have to ask yourself is: is it **really** classified? For example, if your unit has a piece of equipment that is out in plain sight, it probably is not classified. If you know for sure that something is classified, go ahead and state that you won't discuss it for security reasons. Should you inadvertently state something during the course of the interview that is sensitive, stay calm. Go ahead and tell the reporter that the information is sensitive and ask them not to use it. Immediately after the interview, inform your higher headquarters and your public affairs office. This goes back to the accreditation of the journalists when arriving in the area of operations. They are required to sign an agreement that if they stumble upon information that is sensitive, they will not use it. If they do use it anyway, that is grounds for them, and possibly their entire news organization, to have their credentials pulled. Remember they do not want to burn those bridges. They want those future stories.

Just as important as OPSEC is to never lie to a reporter. It destroys credibility for anything else you say. If you don't know the answer to a question, do not be embarrassed to say, "I don't know." Along that same line, don't guess, speculate or be caught answering hypothetical questions. This is a major reason not to discuss rules of engagement at all. Hypothetical questions dealing with ROE can give the enemy insight into how much he can get away with before we respond.

Another thing to avoid saying is, "no comment." Using that term almost always implies you are trying to hide something. If you do not have any information, simply state that you don't have any information to provide at this time. If you do not feel comfortable answering a particular question, do not be afraid to refer it to the public affairs representative.

The tone of the interview should be relaxed, but cautious. You are in control of the interview. You have the right to stop it at any time, even if you are short of the time you initially promised. Avoid calling the reporter "sir" or "ma'am." Use their name instead, this helps to put you more at ease while speaking. When answering a question, stop and think about what you want to say before you speak.

Don't worry about the pause before you answer. If it is to be broadcast, it will be edited out before it is used, and if it is for print publication, obviously you won't read a pause. Explain things in terms that someone not knowledgeable about the military will understand. A simple rule to use is to think of yourself answering a question raised by your parents. Also, be sure to speak slowly and clearly.

An advanced technique is to try working a "command message" into your answer. By a command message, we mean a standard, positive message that we want to get across. A good example of this comes from the MRE example earlier. That same commander was asked to summarize the purpose of the

demonstration he encountered. His response was, "They were protesting the SFOR contingent over something that they thought was unfair. But that's okay, because we are here to keep them safe and help them build a democracy. In a democracy, people have the right to peacefully demonstrate. If they feel safe enough to protest, then we're obviously doing our job right." Here, the commander had a great command message, "…we are here to keep them safe and help them build a democracy." The point about people in a democracy having the right to protest was especially good, because it then made the entire response relevant. Before you interview, the public affairs officer will review the current command messages for your use.

When closing the interview, end on a positive note. Use this opportunity to clear up anything you feel you didn't explain well enough, or anything you want to reinforce. If the reporter asks if there is anything you would like to add, resist the usual practice of just saying, "Hi, mom." Instead, use that last opportunity to get in one last command message.

Media Training in Your Unit

As leaders, you have resources available to train yourself and your soldiers for dealing with the media. Through the public affairs office, you can request assistance during a training exercise or a stand-alone class. Usually, for media training during an exercise, a team of soldiers who role-play as civilian reporters will show up at your training site. You can time their arrival to meet your specific training objectives, but keep in mind; like the real world, they may or may not be escorted by a public affairs representative. This allows your soldiers to learn how to handle the media by reinforcing what can and cannot be done. Reiterate that they cannot detain reporters or their equipment, and searches are authorized only when there is a genuine security concern.

For the purposes of maximizing the training value, get as many of your soldiers on camera as possible. Afterwards, during a pause in the exercise or at the end, have a public affairs representative review the tape with your soldiers as a group and discuss things to sustain and things to improve. During the WFX, it was a training requirement for at least each battalion commander to give an interview. In that case, we gave a quick on-the-spot briefing of what he did well and what he could improve. Experience shows that the soldiers enjoy this training, as it is different and they get to see their efforts on camera. Seeing themselves on camera also reinforces what things they did well and what they can work on for next time. For leaders, it can give an idea of which soldiers to keep in mind when the time comes for real-world media.

A refresher class on media training can be implemented during a train-up for deployment. This can be conducted during soldier readiness checks, or during individual readiness training. This class will include the same basics of media awareness, but will probably be more tailored to the mission in regards to command messages and OPSEC.

Media training does not have to stop at the soldier level. Spouses and other family members can use parts of this training as well. During the recent deployment of 10th Mountain soldiers, the Public Affairs Office gave a presentation on media awareness at family support group meetings. In the past, these presentations have been well received.

If real-world media do visit your training site, they should be kept separate from the role-playing media. The public affairs representative will handle this, but it is important to keep in mind. Other than that, the conduct of the interview should be no different. By putting these discussed techniques into use, it should be a good training tool to prepare you and your soldiers dealing with media on the battlefield.

Referring back to the patrol analogy, we owe it to the American people as well as the Army to tell our story. Once we understand our situation, we must report it to our higher headquarters, the American people. The only way we can communicate with our higher is to use our available tool, the media. Remember, the media always gets their story. We can either help them get the story that portrays the Army in a positive light, or we can ignore them and take our chances.

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